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## Adolescent coping strategies in secondary school

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### Abstract

Numerous researches concerning the coping have often focused on adolescents as they are under the pressure of certain major life changes. This study examines the coping strategies used by adolescents in secondary school. The results show that the whole sample got the highest scores on the productive strategies and the lowest scores on non-productive strategies, particularly on behavioral disengagement and emotional discharge. The gender, age and locus of control introduce differences regarding the use of seeking emotional support, denial, emotional discharge and mental disengagement. The coping strategies tend to group together, productive, non-productive and a transitional, polyvalent group.

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**Keywords:** adolescence, coping strategies, locus of control;

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### 1. Introduction

The debates concerning the concept of stress resulted in the reorientation towards the concept of ‘coping’, which was considered to be more useful. Coping was defined as cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage psychological or physiological stress (Lazarus, 1993), or as a cognitive, emotional and behavioural response to stress (Beutler, Moos, & Lane, 2003). A recent review concerning the coping strategies has collected more than 400 different category labels (Skinner, & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007).

Multiple works have studied the individual differences related to ways of coping, the results being divergent, however. Some researches show that gender is an important variable which can dictate the preference of one coping strategy over another. Women would prefer the coping strategies which are focused on social support or emotional discharge (Băban, 1998). Other researches show that boys prefer active strategies, but do not find significant differences between boys and girls as far as the emotional-

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focused strategies are concerned (Folkman, & Lazarus, 1980). A very recent study shows that women use a larger range of coping strategies as compared to men (Cicognani, 2011).

The researches focused on age difference suggest that, in primary school, the coping strategies are mostly emotional, while during adolescence they diversify, thus becoming more effective (Compas et al., 2001). In explaining the relation between coping and personality, the regression equations show that age was a significant moderator in 12 models, but these relations are stronger in younger samples (Connor-Smith, & Flach, 2007). An important category of stress factors at this age is constituted by the stress factors in the academic environment. School and the learning process are perceived as both stress factors and a means of contributing to the development of coping strategies. The academic environment has come to be considered stressful as a result of the need to comply to the difficult objectives, to obtain certain grades, to confirm the expectancies of the parents, or the social demands, to keep one's state of well-being and solve social relations (Frydenberg et al., 2009; Cunningham et al., 2002). Being under the pressure of major changes in life (Santrock, 2003), facing a variety of problem situations, adolescents use multiple strategies in order to adapt (Strong, De Vault, & Cohen, 2008).

Numerous articles which study coping in the case of students have identified a relationship between stress, the students' academic performance and individual differences (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). A meta-analytical study conducted between 1985 and 2004 concludes that the relations between the personality and adaptability factors may be more modest than initially thought, or are influenced by various moderators, such as the severity of the stressing or demographic factors. This study identifies the following personality traits as relevant for coping: extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, anxiety trait, optimism (Connor-Smith, & Flach, 2007) locus of control (Elfström, & Kreuter, 2006; Scheier, & Carver, 1987).

## **2. Objectives and hypotheses**

The described work concerns the adolescents' perceptions of their coping strategies and correlates. The objectives are: (a) identifying the coping strategies declared by the participating; (b) investigating the differences regarding coping depending on the gender, age and locus of control; (c) to discover patterns in the relationships among the 14 strategies explored. We presume that the adolescents shall use various types of coping and the strategies vary according to the gender, age and locus of control. We intend to check, too if the results obtained on the studied sample are convergent to the ones from other studies conducted in the Romanian environment.

## **3. Method**

The participants were 186 students between 13 and 19 years old ( $M=16.3$ ,  $SD=1.88$ ), 97 boys and 89 girls. The students are studying in two public schools from the urban area: two classes of 8th graders, two classes of 9th year of study and two classes of 11th year of study. The average of the school results is of 8.47, their distribution being asymmetrically negative.

The used instrument is the COPE questionnaire (Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced), designed by Carver, Scheier and Weintraub in 1989. It is composed of 53 items, grouped in 14 strategies, on a four-point Likert scale, where 1 stands for 'I usually don't do this' and 4 stands for 'I often do this'. The Locus of control has been investigated using the Rotter's questionnaire (1966) with 29 items, where a low score indicates an internal control. Basic demographic information was collected on age, gender, grades. The sample is a convenience one and all students were informed of the voluntary nature of their participating and assured of confidentiality.

#### 4. Results

The analysis shows that, considering the whole sample, all coping strategies are used, but to a different extent. Planning gets the highest average score ( $M=13.00$ ,  $SD=2.59$ ), followed, in descending order by reinterpretation, active coping and instrumental support-seeking ( $M=11.89$ ,  $SD=2.62$ ). Without considering strategies such as using alcohol or pills, the lowest scores are obtained by behavioural disengagement ( $M=7.12$ ,  $SD=2.24$ ), preceded by denial and emotional discharge ( $M=8.83$ ,  $SD=2.84$ ).

In order to study the gender and age differences, the t test and the Mann Withney U test were used when the scores were not normally distributed. The results show that differences between boys (m) and girls (f) are present only with certain strategies, such as: seeking emotional support ( $M(m)=10.46$ ,  $M(f)=11.8$ ,  $Z=3.13$ , asymp. sig= $0.002$ , Cohens'd = $0.44$ ), denial ( $M(m)=7.37$ ,  $M(f)=8.25$ ,  $Z=2.67$ , asymp. sig= $0.008$ , Cohens'd = $0.35$ ) and emotional discharge ( $M(m)=8.3$ ,  $M(f)=9.4$ ,  $t=2.69$ ,  $p<0.008$ , Cohens'd = $0.39$ ).

Analyzing the use of coping strategies in connection with the locus of control has required dividing the participants in internal and external ones, according to the scores obtained on the Rotter questionnaire. The obtained data show that with 9 out of the total 14 strategies, the differences between the means of the subgroups are statistically significant (table 1).

Table 1. Significant differences between coping strategies depending on locus of control

Coping strategies	Means		t Test		Mann Withney U Test		Cohens' d
	Internal control	External control	t	p	U	Asympt. sig. 2-tailed	
Active Coping	12.25	11.25	-	-	2.98	.003	0.45
Planning	13.55	11.98	-	-	2.70	.007	0.60
Suppression of competing activities	10.98	10.06	2.76	.007	-	-	0.42
Avoidance	11.42	10.55	2.42	.016	-	-	0.40
Positive reinterpretation	12.97	12.22	2.36	.019	-	-	0.38
Denial	7.47	8.40	-2.39	.018	-	-	0.37
Emotional discharge	8.18	10.00			3.99	.001	0.67
Mental disengagement	8.78	10.11	-3.228	.001	-	-	0.51
Behavioral disengagement	6.78	7.78	-	-	2.25	.001	0.46

For the analysis concerning the age variable, the participants were grouped in three categories: group 1 for the students aged 13-15, group 2 for the students aged between 16-17 and group 3 – for those aged 18-19. The One Way ANOVA technique for independent samples has identified statistically significant differences for the following strategies: a) emotional discharge ( $F(2, 186)=3.16$ ;  $p<.04$ ); the difference appears between the first and second group, its significance being situated at a level lower than 0.02; b) mental disengagement ( $F(2, 186)=12.8$ ;  $p<.001$ ), with differences between the groups 1 and 2, 1 and 3, their significance is situated lower than 0.001. The significances have been tested with Games Howell test.

The relationships between the 14 strategies were investigated using the exploratory factor analysis. With the Kaiser criterion and the scree test, we found that the coping strategies tend to group together, in five blocks. The factors extracted based on correlations were: 1<sup>st</sup> factor including planning, suppression of competing activities, active coping, and positive reinterpretation that explains 21.67% of variance; 2<sup>nd</sup>

factor including mental disengagement, behavioral disengagement, and denial that explains 17.55% of variance; 3<sup>rd</sup> factor including seeking emotional support, seeking social support, emotional discharge, and turning to religion, that explains 10.28% of the variance; 4<sup>th</sup> factor including acceptance of the situation, that explains 7.88% of the variance; and 5<sup>th</sup> factor including opting for alcohol and pills that explains 7.15% of the variance.

## 5. Discussions

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the adolescents' perceptions on their coping strategies. The answers were analyzed according to the criteria of gender, age and locus of control.

The first objective of the study was to identify the coping strategies as declared by the participating students. The analysis of the average scores indicates that the most used ones are planning, reinterpreting, active coping and seeking instrumental support. These strategies are considered to be productive ones, focused on problem solving, so during adolescence the coping diversify, thus becoming more effective. The productive, active strategies take first place in other studies as well, Romanian context included (Băban, 1998). The referenced work has used the same COPE questionnaire but the participants were in late adolescence, at the university. The highest average score was obtained by planning ( $M=13.53$ ,  $SD=2.36$ ), followed by positive reinterpretation, acceptance and active coping and seeking social, emotional and instrumental support, with very close instrumental average scores ( $M=11.77$ ,  $SD=2.78$ ). Disregarding the strategy of using alcohol and pills, the lowest scores were registered for denial ( $M=7.51$ ,  $SD=2.42$ ), proceeded by behavioural disengagement ( $M=8.13.12$ ,  $SD=2.24$ ) and mental disengagement ( $M=9.65$ ,  $SD=2.31$ ). The results of the two studies are quite similar, convergent although the participants had different ages and the two studies were conducted at a distance of almost 13 years one from the other. In booth studies, 'turning to religion' is situated in the medium class of scores with students and students alike. These results are different from those obtained in other cultures where the high scores registered, place Religion first ( $M=6.54$ ), followed by active coping ( $M= 5.24$ ) (Krägeloh, 2011; Yusoff, 2010).

Our second objective concerned gender and age differences in relation to coping. Statistically significant differences between boys and girls were encountered for few strategies-seeking emotional support, denial and emotional discharge. The values registered in the girls' group tend to be higher than those registered in the boys' group, the Cohens'd values being medium. Our results confirm those of other studies. This studies state that women are more open to feelings than fantasy (Costa et al., 2001) and the result may have its origins the expectancies of society, which influence the coping strategies used or declared by men. Focusing on emotions could constitute a lesser accepted behaviour for men, which they could suppress (Connor-Smith et al, 2000; Băban, 1998).

As far as the age variable is concerned, for early and middle adolescence, only two strategies have registered statistically significant differences, emotional discharge and mental disengagement, more frequently reported by younger students (13-15 years old). The results suggest a less productive coping in the case of younger students, as compared to the active strategies, which are encountered at a later stage of development, just like in other studies as well. These results confirm the existence of some development stages of the coping mechanisms in the transition stages towards adulthood. Other objective was to check the use of coping in relation to the locus of control. We found that the students with and internal locus of control get higher scores on productive strategies, while the externals get higher scores on non-productive ones, confirming other studies (Elfström, & Kreuter, 2006).

The third objective of this study was to test the association between the coping strategies at the participating student, using the analysis in the principal components. We found that the coping strategies tend to group together, in five components. The factors identified were: 1st factor named 'Behavioral and cognitive active strategies'; 2nd factor named 'Passive strategy'; 3rd factor named 'Seeking social

support'; 4th 'Cannot change!' factor; and 5th factor named 'Opting for alcohol'. We perceive a group of coping modalities which establish direct correlations with both productive and non-productive strategies, with all factors: seeking instrumental support and accepting the situation. These strategies form a polyvalent, transitional group of strategies. The obtained results suggest that the coping strategies are not universally favourable and that the individuals use various ways of reacting to stress factors confirming other studies (Connor et al, 2007; Lazarus, 1993).

The most important limitation of the study is that it relied only on the participants' self-report, and they have different possibilities of becoming aware of the efforts and ways of coping. The distortion of the answers is possible due to the errors in self-representation, memory errors and the difficulty of aggregating responses over time and across situations. The obtained results may be useful to school psychologists, teachers or parents, in order to guide their efforts towards using some differential training strategies.

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